

Tuesday 12/22/20

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'Unlawful Conduct': US DoJ Sues Walmart for its Alleged Role in Fuelling Opioid Crisis
Walmart

The US opioid crisis started after health care providers began increasingly prescribing opioid medications, following reassurances from pharmaceutical companies in the late 1990s that patients would not become addicted, according to the US National Institute on Drug Abuse. Increased prescriptions and illegal sales led to widespread misuse.

The Trump administration sued Walmart on Tuesday, accusing the multinational retail organization of helping to incite the [US opioid epidemic](#) by inadequately screening for questionable prescriptions despite warnings from its own pharmacists.

According to a [civil complaint filed Tuesday](#), the US Department of Justice (DoJ) has alleged that Walmart "unlawfully dispensed controlled substances from pharmacies it operated across the country and unlawfully distributed controlled substances to those pharmacies throughout the height of the prescription opioid crisis."

The complaint also states that Walmart's alleged unlawful conduct caused hundreds of thousands of violations of the Controlled Substances Act, which regulates certain drugs. The DoJ is thus seeking injunctive relief and civil penalties, the latter of which could cost Walmart billions of dollars.

"It has been a priority of this administration to hold accountable those responsible for the prescription opioid crisis. As one of the largest pharmacy chains and wholesale drug distributors in the country, Walmart had the responsibility and the means to help prevent the diversion of prescription opioids," Jeffrey Bossert Clark, acting assistant attorney general of the DoJ's Civil Division, is quoted as saying in the department's release.

"Instead, for years, it did the opposite — filling thousands of invalid prescriptions at its pharmacies and failing to report suspicious orders of opioids and other drugs placed by those pharmacies. This unlawful conduct contributed to the epidemic of opioid abuse throughout the United States. Today's filing represents an important step in the effort to hold Walmart accountable for such conduct," Clark added.

The suit also alleges that Walmart tried to boost its profits by understaffing its pharmacies, which forced employees to fill prescriptions faster, the [Wall Street Journal reported](#). As a result, pharmacists were unable to reject invalid prescriptions, which helped fuel widespread drug abuse, the DoJ claims. In addition, the suit alleges that Walmart cut its prices for opioids to increase sales, while middle managers pressured pharmacists to quickly fill prescriptions to keep customers coming back.

In a [statement Tuesday](#), Walmart claimed that the lawsuit "invents a legal theory that unlawfully forces pharmacists to come between patients and their doctors, and is riddled with factual inaccuracies and cherry-picked documents taken out of context."

“Blaming pharmacists for not second-guessing the very doctors the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) approved to prescribe opioids is a transparent attempt to shift blame from DEA’s well-documented failures in keeping bad doctors from prescribing opioids in the first place,” Walmart said, also noting that it “always empowered our pharmacists to refuse to fill problematic opioids prescriptions, and they refused to fill hundreds of thousands of such prescriptions.”

According to the Journal, Walmart had been expecting this complaint and sued the federal government [preemptively](#) in October to fight against the allegations. In its suit, Walmart accused both the DoJ and the DEA of trying to scapegoat the retail giant for the government’s own regulatory failures.

Data by the [US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) shows that while the number of American drug overdose deaths decreased by 4% from 2017 to 2018, the total was still four times higher in 2018 than in 1999.

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Anthony Fauci Advises Americans to Assume New COVID-19 Variant Is Already in US
by [Mary F.](#)

Countries across the globe have closed their borders to Britain after health experts revealed last week that a new variant of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, has emerged in the country. The new variant is believed to be about 70% more contagious than other strains.

Anthony Fauci, the director of the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and a member of the White House coronavirus task force, said Tuesday on ABC’s “Good Morning America” that it’s “certainly possible” the new strain of the virus is already present in the US. “When you have this amount of spread within a place like the UK, you really need to assume that it’s here already. ... It certainly is not the dominant strain, but I would certainly not be surprised at all if it is already here,” he noted, [The Hill reported](#).

However, Fauci on Monday advised against “overreacting” to the new strain and implementing a travel ban to stop its spread. When asked about that recommendation on Tuesday, Fauci called travel bans “rather draconian.”

He mentioned the idea of requiring plane passengers to be tested for COVID-19 before traveling, which is being considered in New York, saying, “That’s a big difference than completely shutting off travel and banning travel completely, which is really a rather dramatic step. That’s not really in the cards right now.”

When asked if a travel ban may be necessary at a later time, Fauci said: “I think one of the important things we need to do is to actually do surveillance here and find out. It might actually be here. I doubt that it’s the prevalent strain here, but as [New York Governor Andrew Cuomo] said, it is entirely conceivable that it’s already here.”

In a statement Tuesday, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) also noticed that the new COVID-19 strain could be circulating in the US.

“Ongoing travel between the United Kingdom and the United States, as well as the high prevalence of this variant among current UK infections, increase the likelihood of importation,” [the CDC said Tuesday](#). “Given the small fraction of US infections that have been sequenced, the variant could already be in the United States without having been detected,” the agency noted, adding that the new variant reportedly accounts for about 60% of recent infections in London.

According to the CDC, scientists are currently studying whether COVID-19 mutations may make testing less effective. In addition, there is concern that mutations could decrease the effectiveness of monoclonal antibody treatments, which use laboratory-made proteins that mimic the immune system’s capability to fight off viruses. The agency also mentions the possibility that multiple mutations to the spike protein of the virus might make it more resistant to vaccines.

“Among these possibilities, the last — the ability to evade vaccine-induced immunity — would likely be the most concerning because once a large proportion of the population is vaccinated, there will be immune pressure that could favor and accelerate emergence of such variants by selecting for ‘escape mutants,’” CDC explained. “There is no evidence that this is occurring, and most experts believe escape mutants are unlikely to emerge because of the nature of the virus.” The CEO of BioNTech, the German firm that co-developed Pfizer’s coronavirus vaccine, revealed Tuesday that he believes the vaccine will most likely work against the new COVID-19 strain.

“We don’t know at the moment if our vaccine is also able to provide protection against this new variant,” Ugur Sahin told reporters this week, [according to the Associated Press](#). “But scientifically, it is highly likely that the immune response by this vaccine also can deal with the new virus variants.”

Several nations and territories have already [banned flights from the UK](#) over fears regarding the new strain. They include France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Austria, Ireland, Belgium, Canada, India, Pakistan, Poland, Spain, Switzerland, Sweden, Russia, Jordan and Hong Kong.

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Google Denies DoJ's Antitrust Claims in Court Filing
by [Mary F.](#)

In October, Google was targeted by a US government antitrust lawsuit, which claimed that the company uses its position as the dominant search engine provider through anticompetitive contracts and conduct to limit consumers from using other, competing search engines.

In a Monday [filing](#), Google rebutted the US Department of Justice’s (DoJ) accusations that it uses its multibillion-dollar deals with other tech firms to maintain its position as the dominant online search engine, [Axios reported](#).

“People use Google Search because they choose to, not because they are forced to or because they cannot easily find alternative ways to search for information on the internet,” the company said in the filing.

Google also states in its filing that it has maintained its dominant position in the market because it “developed, continually innovated and promoted” its search engine product as part of its initiative to “organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful.” Last week, US District Judge Amit Mehta [set a tentative trial date of September 12, 2023](#), for the antitrust case, the DoJ’s biggest suit seeking to protect competition since its [case against Microsoft](#) in the 1990s.

Earlier this month, 10 state attorneys general also accused Google of illegally abusing its monopoly over a technology that delivers online ads, [the New York Times reported](#). The complaint claims that Google achieved its monopoly in 2008 after its acquisition of DoubleClick, a company that developed and provided internet ad services. Specifically, the state prosecutors accuse Google of overcharging publishers for the ads it displays across the web. In addition, the company is accused of striking a deal with Facebook to limit the social network’s efforts to compete with Google for ad dollars.

Google has claimed that the allegations made in that suit are “baseless,” the Times reported. Google is not the only tech company facing additional scrutiny.

The Federal Trade Commission and more than 40 states [accused Facebook earlier this month](#) of illegally thwarting competition by acquiring younger rivals.

An October report written and published by the majority staff of the Democratic members of the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Antitrust accuses Amazon, Apple, Facebook and Google of participating in anticompetitive behavior.

“To put it simply, companies that once were scrappy, underdog startups that challenged the status quo have become the kinds of monopolies we last saw in the era of oil barons and railroad tycoons,” [the report states](#).

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Photos: China’s Second Type 075 Amphibious Assault Ship Starts Sea Trials
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The first Type 075 landing helicopter dock (LHD) is not yet in service, and China’s third warship in the class is close to finishing construction. The hybrid warships promise to dramatically expand China’s amphibious assault capabilities.

On Tuesday, the second of China’s Type 075 LHDs took to the seas for the first time. [Photos posted on Sina Weibo showed](#) the 40,000-ton warship - part helicopter carrier, part amphibious assault dock - being escorted by tugboats out of Shanghai’s Hudong-Zhonghua shipyard and into the open seas.

In April, the warship caught fire in the drydock as it neared completion. However, the damage was not serious, [and it was launched a few weeks later](#). A US amphibious assault ship that also caught fire in 2020 was not so lucky: the US Navy announced the decision to [scrap the USS Bonhomme Richard late last month](#), judging that repairs from the four-day fire would roughly equal the cost of building a new ship.

The first Type 075 was recently spotted undergoing sea trials in the South China Sea, having been launched about eight months before the second Type 075.

In July, [Sputnik reported on a proposal by the 708 Institute](#), a design bureau for China State Shipbuilding Corporation (CSSC), suggesting a modified version of the Type 075 with an electromagnetic catapult on the flight deck for launching fixed-wing drones. However, nothing has come of the proposed Type 076 as of yet. Instead, Hudong-Zhonghua is completing a third Type 075, with five more planned in the class, and is building a Type 071 amphibious transport dock for Thailand and a Type 054A frigate for Pakistan.

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Scottish First Minister Sturgeon Says 'Sorry' After Breaking Own Mask Mandate
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

With the discovery of a faster-spreading variant of COVID-19, UK parliamentary leaders are considering moving to the most stringent lockdown restrictions since the spring, shuttering nonessential shops.

Just hours after reiterating the importance of wearing face masks in public to stem the spread of COVID-19, news broke that Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon had been caught chatting it up with pensioners without a facial covering on days earlier.

"This was a stupid mistake, and I'm really sorry. I talk every day about the importance of masks, so I'm not going to offer any excuses," [Sturgeon told the BBC](#). "I was in the wrong, I'm kicking myself, and I'm sorry."

The incident happened on Friday at the Stable Bar and Restaurant in southern Edinburgh: [Sturgeon was photographed speaking to three people](#) at a table while attending the wake of a Scottish civil servant. Although she was several feet away from the elderly trio, Sturgeon was without her trademark tartan mask.

The mandatory use of face masks in hospitality settings has been British law since September, with violations punishable by a £60 fine.

Earlier on Tuesday at Holyrood, [Sturgeon urged the diligent wearing of masks](#) in all public environs, noting that a virulent new COVID-19 strain "seems to transmit more easily, but it can still be stopped in its tracks by the FACTS advice we have emphasised so many times before."

She then began to list the FACTS acronym, of which the F stands for face coverings.

"All of these things still work in reducing the transmission of this new strain," she told Scottish lawmakers. "So wherever you are I would ask everyone to assume that the virus and especially this new strain of it is there with you and to act in a way that will minimize the chances of spread."

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China Releases New Energy Security Strategy to Diversify, Conserve Power
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The new policy outline comes on the heels of news about China's first indigenously-designed nuclear reactor coming online and a successful test of an experimental fusion reactor, both of which could help the country become carbon-neutral and energy independent.

On Monday, China's State Council Information Office released a new white paper outlining the country's new approach to energy independence. [Titled "Energy in China's New Era," the paper proposes](#) four broad-reaching energy policy reforms alongside stepped-up international cooperation to promote both nation's energy independence.

Among the changes proposed include reforms to the country's energy consumption practices in order to maximize energy conservation; upgrading its industry to accommodate the energy efficiency push; an increased push toward diversified energy sources, especially renewable energy and nuclear power; and introducing further market forces into the energy sector in the interests of streamlining government administration.

In addition to these reforms, the report also calls for increasing international cooperation, especially along the lines of the Belt and Road Initiative, to build mutual energy independence with other nations.

China's Energy Accomplishments

The report hails China's existing energy accomplishments, including its prioritization of so-called "clean coal" as [the world's largest coal consumer](#), its 10.8% reduction in coal use since 2012 and its world leadership in increasing its own carbon emissions-cutting goals well above those of other world powers. Beijing now estimates its carbon emissions will peak in 2030 and that [the country will be totally carbon-neutral by 2060](#).

However, the report also notes that at the end of last year, China was the world's largest producer of clean energy, too, accounting for 30% of the world total. China leads the globe in installed solar, wind, biomass and hydroelectric power.

It also notes that by 2015, China achieved the monumental goal of total electrification of the country, providing power to the last areas that previously lacked access to it. This is part of a larger program toward poverty alleviation that has centered renewable energy production; the report notes that since 2014, a vast expansion of solar power generation has benefited nearly 60,000 poor villages and 4.15 million poor households and created 1.25 million new jobs.

In addition, China accounted for more than half of the world's "new energy vehicles," including electric plug-in cars, hybrids gas-electric cars and fuel cell cars, with 1.2 million new vehicles hitting the road last year. Accordingly, China also now has the largest car-charging network on the planet and has set a goal of totally [phasing out new cars powered purely by petroleum products](#) by 2035.

Part of its push to make energy use greener has been transitioning from using coal and oil as heating fuel toward totally electric heating systems, along with similar moves in manufacturing and transport; the report notes a 32.6% increase in electricity use that displaced other sources of energy in just the last year.

Late last month, the No. 5 unit at the Fuqing Nuclear Power Plant [was connected to the power grid in Fujian Province](#). Known as Hualong One, it is the country's first operational nuclear reactor of domestic design. While China paused nuclear plant projects for several years after

the Fukushima Daiichi disaster in Japan in 2011, that ban was recently lifted, and several other reactors of the Hualong One design are under construction, including one in Pakistan. The reactor is among the most advanced in the globe, a direct competitor with US-based Westinghouse's AP1000 reactor.

Just a week after Hualong One powered up, [an experimental fusion power plant was turned on](#) for the first time in Chengdu, Sichuan Province. Unlike the nuclear fission that powers conventional nuclear power stations, fusion power produces almost no harmful radiation and is capable of truly vast amounts of power generation, being the same chemical process that powers the sun. However, it will be many years before a functional fusion power station becomes operational.

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US Navy Sends Warship Through China's Claimed Waters for Second Time in a Week
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

China's new aircraft carrier, Shandong, is also on its way to the South China Sea for military drills. The warship was spotted near Hainan on Tuesday and is reported to be carrying a new squadron of J-15 fighters.

For the second time in a week, a US Navy warship purposefully flouted China's nautical claims by sailing directly through the waterway in question.

[On Tuesday, the US Seventh Fleet announced](#) the Arleigh Burke-class destroyer USS John S. McCain had "asserted navigational rights and freedoms in the Spratly Islands, consistent with international law." The statement made no mention of which island or islands the McCain sailed past or how close the warship came to land.

According to the Navy, the operation was directed at all nations with maritime claims in the South China Sea, including Vietnam, Taiwan and China. [As Sputnik previously reported, all three nations](#) have engaged in land reclamation efforts and military fortification of islands in the Spratly Island chain; however, Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines have also laid claim to some of the Spratlys.

The tiny islands sit atop coral reefs in the eastern South China Sea and are believed to be surrounded by a seafloor rich in petroleum deposits. Earlier this year, the US State Department issued a statement rejecting China's claims over sea lanes around the islands, but did not directly dispute Beijing's claims on the islands themselves. That said, Washington has also sanctioned people connected to Chinese activities on the islands.

However, the McCain wasn't alone: People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) Senior Col. [Tian Junli, spokesperson for the PLA Southern Theater Command, said](#) Chinese naval and air forces "conducted whole-process tracking and monitoring on the US destroyer and warned it off."

Tian further blasted Washington's violation of Chinese sovereignty and security and accused it of gravely undermining peace and stability in the South China Sea.

The USS McCain previously performed a “freedom of navigation operation” ([FONOP](#)) in [Russia’s Peter the Great Gulf in late November](#). The US ship sailed several kilometers inside the straight baseline established by Moscow in 1984, as Washington argued Moscow had claimed too much of the waterway as its own.

Tuesday’s FONOP wasn’t the only such operation this week, either: [on December 19, the US Navy destroyer USS Mustin sailed](#) through the Taiwan Strait, a waterway regarded by Beijing as its own, since it does not recognize the Republic of China government on Taiwan and claims sovereignty over all Chinese territory, including Taiwan. Technically, the US agrees, since it agreed to switch diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing in 1979, but in practice the US does much to support the Taiwanese government politically and militarily.

[Beijing accused the US of sending “flirtatious glances”](#) at pro-independence forces in Taiwan with the maneuver, and said it was “jeopardizing peace and stability in the strait.” It was the 12th time a US warship had sailed through the Taiwan Strait in 2020.

Last week, the Pentagon released a [new maritime strategy document titled “Advantage at Sea”](#) outlining how the US Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard can maintain US naval supremacy through the 2020s.

Calling China “the most pressing, long-term strategic threat” and “the only rival with the combined economic and military potential to present a long term, comprehensive challenge to the US,” [the document calls for the naval services to](#) “accept calculated tactical risks and adopt a more assertive posture” in their “day-to-day operations.”

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Photo: Hubble Telescope Tracks Neptune's Peculiar ‘Dark Spot Jr.’ as Larger Storm Puzzles Scientists

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The Hubble Space Telescope has been NASA’s only way to study the details of our solar system’s outermost planet since the Voyager 2 probe whisked by it in 1989. Neptune’s mysterious “dark spot” storms, found to come and go in a couple of years, have so far defied explanation.

[According to a new report by NASA](#), Neptune’s latest massive storm has engaged in some unexpected behavior in the last few months, dodging what scientists believed to be a certain death in the gassy planet’s equatorial zone and spawning a smaller storm in the process. When [Voyager 2 photographed Neptune for the first time in 1989](#), it revealed a large, whirling storm in the blue planet’s southern hemisphere that NASA astronomers initially believed analogous to [Jupiter’s Great Red Spot, which has been whirling](#) at least since Giovanni Cassini pointed a telescope at it more than 350 years ago. However, that proved not to be true, and they now know Neptune’s storms last about two years.

The present “dark spot” storm, this time in Neptune’s northern hemisphere, was first spotted in 2018, meaning it was likely on its way toward dissipation as it slowly but inescapably slunk toward the planet’s equator, where the coriolis effect keeping it whirling would fall apart.

However, the storm didn't do that: instead, it seems to have spawned a second, smaller storm, dubbed "Dark Spot Jr.," and reversed course, heading back northward again.

"We are excited about these observations because this smaller dark fragment is potentially part of the dark spot's disruption process," Michael H. Wong, of the University of California at Berkeley, said in the NASA news release. "This is a process that's never been observed. We have seen some other dark spots fading away and they're gone, but we've never seen anything disrupt, even though it's predicted in computer simulations."

"Maybe by shedding that fragment, that was enough to stop it from moving towards the equator," Wong added.

The storm is 4,600 miles across - larger than the Atlantic Ocean - and is actually a high-pressure system, making it distinctly different from low-pressure storms like hurricanes.

[The gaseous atmosphere it swirls in is made up](#) primarily of hydrogen and helium, but also contains icy forms of water, ammonia and methane. Being 30 times as far from the sun as the Earth is, the tops of Neptune's clouds are a frigid negative 218 degrees Celsius.

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West Wing Evasion - Political Cartoon

With just a few days left in the White House, reports suggest that US President Donald Trump is growing increasingly frustrated with members of his administration, especially those who have distanced themselves from his unsubstantiated voter fraud claims.

A [new report from Axios](#) said on Tuesday that top officials were keeping away from the West Wing, as Trump has turned his ire against a number of his high-profile allies, including US Vice President Mike Pence, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) and US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, among others.

The report adds that if officials are not inclined to "use the Department of Homeland Security or the military to impound voting machines," Trump is considering them "weak and beneath contempt."

The latest comes just three days [after reports emerged from Axios](#) that White House aides were growing increasingly concerned about Trump "spending too much time with people they consider crackpots or conspiracy theorists and flirting with blatant abuses of power."

As Inauguration Day draws closer, Trump has remained adamant that the 2020 presidential election was stolen from him as a result of rampant voter fraud, an allegation that several administration officials have brushed away.

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Video: Pornhub Releases Sex Ed Content That Compares COVID-19 Virus to 9/11 Attackers by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The terrorist attacks that took place on September 11, 2001, killed nearly 3,000 individuals and injured more than 6,000 others. It's considered one of the most lethal terrorist attacks and prompted a series of changes in the US' anti-terror approaches and operations around the world.

Adult content site Pornhub recently released a new video for its sexual wellness section that provided insight on COVID-19's effect on male genitalia, specifically how the SARS-CoV-2 virus could cause erectile dysfunction.

The [Tuesday post](#) includes a YouTube video by Dr. Judson Brandeis, a board-certified health care worker, that was published on December 10. In the video, Brandeis explains the ins and outs of how the COVID-19 virus attacks one's body at the cellular level; however, there is one remark that's likely to catch viewers' attention.

Moments after highlighting that COVID-19 damages the lining along blood vessels, Brandeis opts to compare the virus to - wait for it - the September 11 attacks.

"I'm concerned that the COVID-19 pandemic will result in widespread erectile dysfunction," the medical professional said, before explaining that the SARS-CoV-2 virus attacks blood vessels and affects blood flow within the human body. "As the infection mounts, there's an epic battle going on."

"Just like the 9/11 terrorists used our own airplanes to take down the Twin Towers, the coronavirus hijacks our own cells to create new viruses, which are then released in huge numbers," he said.

Quickly moving past the comparison, Brandeis later notes that "our immune system has never seen this virus before," and says research has found that nitric oxide can lessen the disease's effect on the human body, particularly blood vessels.

Brandeis later urges viewers to maintain COVID-19 countermeasures, including social distancing and mask-wearing.

Pornhub, which recently came under fire over content that was [connected to the alleged exploitation and abuse of minors](#), launched its [sex education series in October](#) with the intention of providing its users with pointers on a variety of sex-related topics.

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Twitter to Wipe Out Followers on Official White House Accounts Before Biden Takeover
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Social media platform Twitter noted in late November it was actively working with the US National Archives and Records Administration to handle the transfer of several White House accounts. At the time, it was believed the transition would follow the same process that occurred during the 2017 handover to the incoming Trump administration.

Rob Flaherty, the digital director for US President-elect Joe Biden's presidential campaign, [revealed on Tuesday](#) that Twitter had told the team it would be resetting the follower lists on all White House-linked Twitter accounts.

The Biden team official later remarked in a follow-up tweet that the campaign had fought against the idea of wiping the follower lists, but was informed that the move "[was unequivocal](#)."

The [revelation was later confirmed](#) by the Wall Street Journal's Emily Glazer, who explained that the affected accounts would include the White House, POTUS and VP Twitter accounts, among others. Twitter also indicated that followers of the current accounts will be notified and given the choice to follow the new Biden accounts.

The three aforementioned accounts currently have nearly 70 million followers collectively, about 19 million fewer than Trump has on his personal Twitter account, which he has frequently used instead of the official White House accounts.

Twitter's updated policy is a complete change from the steps taken during the transition from the Obama administration to the Trump administration, when the company simply allowed the follower lists to be absorbed by the incoming officials.

When Twitter was contacted about Flaherty's remarks, spokesperson Nick Pacilio remarked that the company has been in "ongoing discussions with the Biden transition team on a number of aspects related to White house account transfers."

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Trump Grants Full Pardon to Former Campaign Adviser George Papadopoulos, 14 Others by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Emerging reports have suggested that US President Donald Trump is considering granting additional pardons to several individuals tied to the Russia investigation that drew much attention throughout his time in office. Pardons may be issued to Trump family members and even his personal attorney Rudy Giuliani.

Amid reports that Trump would be issuing a slew of last-minute pardons before his anticipated exit from the White House, the commander-in-chief granted clemency on Tuesday to over a dozen individuals.

Among the pardoned was former [campaign adviser George Papadopoulos](#), who pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI during interviews about his ties to a London-based official who claimed to have dirt on then-2016 presidential candidate Hillary Clinton.

"Mr. Papadopoulos was charged with a process-related crime, one count of making false statements, in connection with special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into possible Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election," the release said on Tuesday. "Notably, Mueller stated in his report that he found no evidence of collusion in connection with Russia's attempts to interfere in the election."

The release added that Papadopoulos' pardon "helps correct the wrong that Mueller's team inflicted on so many people."

[Lawyer Alex van der Zwaan](#), who worked with former Trump campaign chairman Paul Manafort in work linked to Ukraine, was also issued a pardon. Papadopoulos and Van der Zwaan both served short prison sentences for their crimes.

Individuals close to Trump [hinted to the New York Times](#) that the development suggests that more Russiagate-related pardons will surface in the remaining weeks of the Trump administration.

Others who were issued pardons included former [Reps. Duncan Hunter \(R-CA\)](#) and [Chris Collins \(R-NY\)](#), and four Blackwater guards who were convicted over the 2007 killing of 14 unarmed Iraqi civilians. The White House indicated that the pardons for both Collins and Hunter had been requested by members of the US Congress.

The spate of pardons come after Trump granted clemency last month to his former national security adviser Michael Flynn, who had pleaded guilty twice to lying to the FBI during the Russia probe.

Citing records from the US Justice Department, [CNBC reported](#) that prior to December 18, Trump issued a total of 28 pardons and 16 commutations. Aside from Flynn, past pardons were issued to former Arizona sheriff Joe Arapaio, conservative pundit Dinesh D'Souza and former New York Police Commissioner Bernard Kerik.

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Milky Way Possibly Riddled With Dead Alien Civilizations Who Annihilated Themselves - Study by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

A newly published research paper estimates that the optimal time frame for the development of alien civilizations took place about 8 billion years after the Milky Way was formed, and that such civilizations have more than likely already killed themselves off.

The [new study](#), which was authored by researchers with NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory and the California Institute of Technology, is [based on the Drake equation](#) and examined where and when other intelligent life forms may have lived or be living in the cosmos.

Researchers took into consideration a variety of factors that would influence the development of alien life, such as the frequency of radiation-emitting supernovas, the time needed for intelligent life to evolve and the potential tendency for civilizations to destroy themselves, as well as the prevalence of sun-like stars harboring Earth-like planets.

With a model in hand, officials determined that intelligent life was most likely to emerge about 8 billion years after the formation of the Milky Way, noting that the likelihood of such life surfacing peaked at about 13,000 light-years from the galactic center.

By comparison, Earth, which sits some 25,000 light-years from the galactic center, saw humans emerge roughly 13.5 billion years after the formation of the Milky Way.

"As we cannot assume a low probability of annihilation, it is possible that intelligent life elsewhere in the galaxy is still too young to be observed by us," researchers concluded in their study. "Therefore, our findings can imply that intelligent life may be common in the galaxy but is still young, supporting the optimistic aspect for the practice of [search for extraterrestrial intelligence]."

However, the researchers also found that the potential for self-annihilation was “highly influential in the quantity of galactic intelligent life,” with officials speculating that “if intelligent life is likely to destroy themselves, it is not surprising that there is little or no intelligent life elsewhere.”

The researchers suggested that such self-annihilation may have resulted from war, climate change or the development of biotechnology, all possibilities cited in studies dating back to the early 1960s.

The study, which was [published in the arXiv database](#), has been submitted to a journal and is set to be peer-reviewed. The report comes after a team of scientists from the University of Nottingham estimated that [there were 36 communicating, intelligent, alien civilizations](#) in the Milky Way.

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Trump Says He Wants Changes Made to COVID Relief Bill Passed by Congress

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump said he wants Congress to remove unnecessary items from the coronavirus relief bill passed on Monday and to also raise the stimulus payments from \$600 to \$2,000.

"I'm asking Congress to amend this bill and increase the ridiculously low \$600 to \$2,000 or \$4,000 for a couple," Trump said in a pre-recorded video on Tuesday. "I'm also asking Congress to immediately get rid of the wasteful and unnecessary items from this legislation."

On late Monday, Congress passed a \$900 billion emergency coronavirus relief bill that was consolidated with a \$1.4 trillion spending bill to keep the government running in 2021.

The Senate passed the bill with a 92-6 veto-proof margin. The House of Representatives passed the bill in two veto-proof votes.

Trump specifically had an issue with the bill having millions of dollars in aid money for foreign countries in the Indo-Pacific, Central America, and the Middle East.

Trump mentioned the \$1.3 billion aid money for Egypt and its military would probably be used to purchase military equipment from Russia.

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Russian Church Abroad to Host Youth Conference Despite Strict COVID-19 Restrictions

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The Russian Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR) will hold its traditional youth conference in a limited format on December 25 despite strict COVID-19 restrictions, the conference director, Archpriest Alexey Duncan, told Sputnik.

"This year with the COVID-19 we have great restrictions and we are not able to conduct the conference as we usually do. However, metropolitan Hilarion of New York, archbishop Gabriel

of Montreal, Canada, and bishop Nicholas of Manhattan will be serving the Divine Liturgy with a number of priests and deacons in ROCOR Synod in New York," Father Alexey said on Tuesday. The annual assembly of young Orthodox parishioners, established by the ROCOR in the late 1970s, was named after St. Herman of Alaska, one of the Russian missionaries who came to the Russian colonies in America in the 18th century.

"The fest of St. Herman of Alaska falls on the same day as Catholic Christmas - December 25. Our church realized that our young people have a different calendar and spiritual experience than the rest of their American friends, and so it was necessary for us to offer them something that would keep them in tune with our Russian traditions," Father Alexey said.

Traditionally, almost 200 young adults from different countries gather in one of the ROCOR parishes, generally in the northeastern portion of the US, to discuss major topics of their church life. This year, however, no more than 35 people would be able to take part in the conference in person in Synod, while another 100 participants will join services online.

"I am quite sure that after the Divine Liturgy on December 25 the young people that are able to attend the service in person will be able to get together to have a discussion," Father Alexey said.

Discussions will include a centennial of the Russian Church Abroad, fight against COVID-19, coronavirus-related restrictions upon churches, and how Orthodox Christians need to approach those issues, he added.

Young Russian Orthodox outside and inside Russia face similar problems and have similar ways to solve them, the priest noted.

"The big question for everyone is how you live the spiritual life and how you maintain Russian Orthodox traditions. There are many elements of that, such as the COVID-19, but also simply matters of politics because we live in the world that is somewhat turned upside down," he said.

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trump wants congress to raise stimulus payment to \$2,000

Sputnik

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Trump Pardons Ex-Aide Papadopoulos Charged in Mueller Probe - White House

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump has granted a full pardon to former aide George Papadopoulos, who was charged in the Mueller probe, the White House said in a press release.

"Today, President Trump granted a full pardon to George Papadopoulos. Mr. Papadopoulos was charged with a process-related crime, one count of making false statements, in connection with Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into possible Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election," the release said on Tuesday. "Notably, Mueller stated in his report that he found no evidence of collusion in connection with Russia's attempts to interfere in the election."

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UN Security Council Decides to End African Union-UN Mission in Darfur - President

UNITED NATIONS, December 22 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council adopted a resolution that will end the African Union-United Nations Hybrid Operation in Sudan's Darfur (UNAMID) on December 31, South African Ambassador to the United Nations Jerry Matjila said.

"The result of the voting is as follows; the draft resolution received 15 votes in favor. The draft resolution has been adopted unanimously," Matjila, who presides with the UN Security Council during the month of December, said on Tuesday.

The draft resolution, sponsored by the United Kingdom and Germany, will terminate the mission's mandate after its was renewed by the UN Security Council on June 3.

As a result of the decision, more than 6,000 military and 1,500 civilian UNAMID personnel will be withdrawn from Sudan.

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Attorney Calls for Arrest of Texas Officer Involved in Fatal Shooting of Black Man

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - Civil rights attorney Benjamin Crump called during a press conference for the arrest of the police officer involved in the fatal shooting of 22-year-old Black man Joshua Feast in La Marque, Texas.

"We are very troubled that Officer Santos still has a job...We demand that Officer [Jose] Santos be terminated and that he be arrested for the killing of Joshua Feast," Crump said on Tuesday. Crump, who is representing Feast's family, also called on the US Justice Department and the Texas Attorney General to investigate this incident because they think the Galveston County Sheriff's Department will give an unfair investigation.

On Monday, the La Marque Police Department released Santos' dashboard and body camera video footage of the fatal incident on December 9 that showed Santos shooting Feast as he was running away from his car.

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Canadian National Goes on Trial in US For \$180M In Psychic Fraud Scam - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - A Canadian national who operated a psychic mail fraud scheme for two decades made his initial appearance in a US court on charges of stealing more than \$180 million from Americans, many of them elderly, the US Department of Justice said in a press release.

"The scheme allegedly involved sending millions of US consumers, many elderly and vulnerable, letters purporting to be from two well-known French psychics, promising that the recipient had the opportunity to achieve great wealth and happiness with the psychic's assistance in exchange for payment of a fee," the release said on Tuesday.

From 1994 through November 2014, defendant Patrice Runner's scheme defrauded at least 1 million victims in the United States of over \$180 million, the release said.

Runner and his co-conspirators obtained the names of elderly and vulnerable victims by renting and trading mailing lists with other mail fraud operatives, the release said.

The letters frequently stated that a psychic had seen a personalized vision regarding the recipient of the letter, when in fact the scheme sent nearly identical letters to tens of thousands of victims each week, the release added.

Runner made his initial appearance Tuesday in federal court in the state of New York following his arrival in the United States on Monday from Spain, where he was arrested based on a US indictment, according to the release.

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Train Carrying Crude Oil Cargo Derails North of Seattle, Catches Fire - Officials

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - A train carrying a cargo of crude oil derailed north of Seattle, Washington, and caught fire near the town of Custer, resulting in the evacuation of everyone within half a mile of the site, the local Whatcom County government authority announced in a message.

"Train derailment in the Custer area. Please evacuate if you are within half a mile of downtown Custer for your safety and the safety of responders," the Whatcom County said via Twitter on Tuesday.

Whatcom County also said there is a large response to the fire and the authorities have closed Grandview and Main Streets at Portal Way.

Initial reports said the train derailed around 11:40 a.m. local time and between three to five tank cars were derailed. Then a fire broke out at the back of the train. There were no reports of any casualties before nightfall.

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Trump Administration Close to Landing Deal With Pfizer to Provide More Vaccines - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The Trump administration is close to finalizing a deal with the pharmaceutical company Pfizer to purchase more coronavirus vaccines, the New York Times reported citing people familiar with the negotiations.

The report said on Tuesday that the deal includes Pfizer providing 70 million doses from April through June in the United States in exchange for broader access to manufacturing supplies through the Defense Production Act.

Pfizer has already been contracted to provide the United States with 100 million doses by the end of March.

The report said, according to obtained documents, Pfizer has asked the Trump administration since September to grant it more access to supplies and raw materials needed to make the vaccine so that it could meet the demand.

The agreement could be announced as early as Wednesday, the report added.

An estimated 2 million doses of the Pfizer vaccine and 5.9 million doses of the Moderna vaccine are expected to be delivered this week throughout the United States, including on Christmas Day, according to US officials.

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US Halts Hospital Trials of Blood Thinners for Severe COVID-19 Infections - Health Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The United States stopped enrolling hospitalized patients with severe cases of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in clinical trials of blood thinners after observing no benefit from the potential treatment, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) said in a press release.

"Among critically ill COVID-19 patients requiring intensive care unit (ICU) support, therapeutic anti-coagulation drugs did not reduce the need for organ support," the release said on Tuesday. The NIH pointed out that enrollment and trials will continue for moderately ill hospitalized COVID-19 patients because researchers have yet to determine an optimal dose to prevent blood clots - a common complication.

Unusual clotting can cause multiple health complications, including lung failure, heart attack, and stroke, the release noted.

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Biden Says Cyberattack Constitutes Grave Risk to US Security, Was Carefully Planned

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - US President-elect Joe Biden said on Tuesday that the recent massive cyber attack on US federal agencies and companies represents a grave threat to national security and was well planned and carried out.

"This attack constitutes a grave risk to our national security," Biden told reporters. "It was carefully planned and carefully orchestrated. It was carried out by using sophisticated cyber tools. The attackers succeeded in catching the federal government off guard and unprepared." Biden said much about the cyber attack still remains unknown, including the scope and extent of the damage.

Biden also said the foreign actors have been working on carrying out the attack since at least last year and added that the Trump administration has failed to prioritize cyber security.

On December 13, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) warned that US federal, state and local governmental institutions, critical infrastructure and private entities face a grave threat as a result of the months-long cyber attack by an advanced persistent threat actor.

The Washington Post alleged that a group of hackers supposedly linked to Russian intelligence may be behind the intrusion, but provided no evidence to back its claims. Russia's Embassy in Washington dismissed the accusations as unfounded.

Trump administration officials, including Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Attorney General William Barr, alleged that a hacking group with links to Russian intelligence was behind it but they too provided no evidence.

However, President Donald Trump suggested that China rather than Russia may be behind the cyberattacks and said the scale of the cyberattacks had been exaggerated by the media and the situation was under control.

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Biden Continues to Believe Controversial Reports on His Son Part of Russian Disinformation
WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - President-elect Joe Biden said during a press conference that he still believes media reports about his son Hunter Biden's corrupt business dealings abroad are part of a Russian disinformation campaign.

US media previously reported, according to obtained emails, that Hunter Biden had used his father's position as US vice president to make deals with Chinese, Ukrainian and other authorities and businesses.

"Yes, yes, yes," Joe Biden said when asked if he still thinks the stories about his son this fall were part of a Russian disinformation campaign.

Biden said his Justice Department will be independent when deciding how to proceed with the investigation into allegations of his son's corrupt business dealings.

The president-elect added that there have been no discussions with his team or potential pick for US Attorney General about Hunter Biden's legal troubles.

Hunter Biden announced earlier this month that the US Attorney's Office in Delaware is investigating his tax records, but added he is confident the review will show he acted legally and appropriately.

Hunter Biden did not report approximately \$400,000 in income he collected after joining the Ukrainian energy company Burisma's board of directors in 2014, according to media reports. US President Donald Trump had earlier publicly called on the US authorities to investigate Hunter Biden for selling access to the office of US Vice President and other corrupt practices in Ukraine, China and elsewhere. Trump has warned that Hunter's questionable business dealings have compromised US national security.

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Biden Vows to Put Forward Another COVID-19 Relief Plan Early Next Year

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - US President-Elect Joe Biden said on Tuesday that he would put forward another relief plan in early 2021 to address the COVID-19 crisis.

"Congress did its job this week and I can and I must ask them to do it again next year," Biden told a live-streamed briefing, referring to the near \$900 billion stimulus package passed this week for the pandemic. "I can and I must ask them to do it again next year. Even with the changes in approach I'm gonna put in place in late January, people are still going to be getting sick and dying from the COVID."

He said the relief passed in 2021 would include stimulus checks for needy Americans, who received \$1,200 per person during an earlier round in relief in March and will be getting \$600 from the latest initiative.

"Yes it will," Biden said in response to a question on whether forthcoming stimulus plans would continue with personal aid to help regular people most stressed by the pandemic. "I think you're seeing that there is a clear understanding that these issues go beyond any ideology, that people are desperately hurting and the Republicans are hurting as badly as Democrats."

More than 21 million Americans lost their jobs between March and April, at the height of lockdowns forced by the COVID-19. A rebound of 2.5 million jobs was logged in May and 4.8 million in June, before the recovery began slowing. For both September and October, less than 700,000 jobs were added each month. In November, there were just 245,000 additions.

The US economy itself shrank by 5 percent in the first quarter and a record 31.4 percent in the subsequent three months before rebounding by 33.1 percent in the third quarter.

Despite the economic rebound and the promise of vaccines, the coronavirus pandemic has raged anew in the United States in recent weeks, after a respite in the summer to early fall period. Infections have risen above 18 million since January, hospitalization has hit daily record highs of above 100,000 and the death toll has hit almost 320,000.

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Biden Expects to Overturn Trump Immigration Policies Within 6 Months

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - US President-Elect Joe Biden said he expects to lift many of the existing immigration and asylum restrictions imposed by the Trump administration within six months.

Biden on the campaign said he would reverse many of Trump's strict immigration policies, including restrictions on asylum seekers, within his first 100 days in office.

"It's going to take probably... six months to put that in place," Biden said at a press conference on Tuesday when asked about the timeline for rolling back some of the specific Trump administration immigration policies.

The president-elect said he will not lift every restriction on day one or immediately halt the current asylum process because the US would then end up with 2 million people stranded on the southern border. Biden warned changing things immediately to "what it was 20 years ago," would only complicate the crisis.

"I already started discussing these issues with the President of Mexico and our friends in Latin America, and the timeline is to do it so that we in fact make it better not worse," Biden said.

He stressed that it requires getting a lot of things in place including the funding.

Biden during his campaign promised that in the first 100 days he would reverse the Trump's administration's policies that deter asylum-seeking migrants seeking refuge in the United States, end prolonged detention of migrants in the United States, and end Trump's National Emergency on the border that justified the use of Defense dollars on new border wall.

Earlier efforts to halt the influx of migrants coming to the United States included a "zero-tolerance" policy that led to the separation of children from families, sending more than 60,000 asylum seekers back to Mexico to wait for their asylum applications, and a ban on asylum seekers who crossed through a third country to reach the United States.

In October, US media reported, citing the American Civil Liberties Union, that the Trump administration is unable to find the parents of nearly 600 migrant children in US custody. More than 1,000 migrant families were separated in 2017 under the so-called zero-tolerance policy.

In addition, Biden has promised to surge humanitarian aid to the southern US border, offer deportation protections for migrants brought to the United States illegally as children - also known as Dreamers - and an end to the travel and refugee bans on Muslim-majority countries.

Biden also wants Congress to pass legislation to clear the path to citizenship for nearly 11 million people living in the United States and to reform visa programs for temporary migrant workers in certain industries.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY
WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik)

NEW US SANCTIONS AGAINST SYRIA

- * The United States has added Syria's Central Bank, seven Syrians and nine Syrian entities to its Specially Designated and Nationals and Blocked Persons List (SDN List), the US Treasury Department announced in a press release on Tuesday.
- * The United States will remain committed to its policy of economic and political pressure on the government of Syria, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State and Special Envoy for Syria Joel Rayburn told reporters.

PUTIN TALKS WITH MACRON, ABBAS

- * Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke by phone with his French counterpart, Emmanuel Macron, and discussed the Nagorno-Karabakh settlement among other issues, the Kremlin said on Tuesday.
- * Putin and Macron agreed to continue work on Donbas settlement in the Normandy format, the Kremlin said.
- * Putin and Macron also discussed the situation concerning Iran's nuclear program, noting the need for collective efforts to preserve the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the Kremlin said.
- * Putin talked separately with his Palestinian counterpart Mahmoud Abbas concerning the coronavirus response, including potential deliveries of Russian vaccines, and situation in the Middle East, the Kremlin said.

PENTAGON CHIEF VISITS AFGHANISTAN

- * Acting US Defense Secretary Christopher Miller has payed an unannounced visit to Afghanistan as the United States draws down troop numbers in the country, the Pentagon announced in a press release on Tuesday.
- * Afghan President Ashraf Ghani met this afternoon with Miller, Ghani's office said.

RUSSIA ON US SANCTIONS

- * The latest US sanctions are unlikely to make a big negative impact on the Russian military-industrial complex, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Yury Borisov said Tuesday.
- * The impact of the new US sanctions on Russia's and China's policies is close to zero, Dmitry Medvedev, the Russian Security Council said.
- * Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov qualified the new US sanctions as "another unfriendly step" hindering normalization of bilateral relations.

CORONAVIRUS-RELATED DEVELOPMENTS

- * Russian consumer rights watchdog Rospotrebnadzor is closely monitoring the situation concerning the new strain of coronavirus, including in the United Kingdom, the organization's head Anna Popova said on Tuesday.
- * Fifty-two thousand people have been inoculated against the coronavirus in Russia so far, Health Minister Mikhail Murashko said.

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US Warship John S. McCain Sails Through South China Sea to Enforce Free Navigation - Navy
WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The US Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer John S. McCain transited the South China Sea to challenge sovereignty claims by some nations over all or part of the strategic waterway that supports up to one-third of global maritime trade, the Navy said in a press release on Tuesday.

"The United States upholds freedom of navigation as a principle. As long as some countries continue to assert maritime claims that are inconsistent with international law as reflected in the 1982 Law of the Sea Convention and that purport to restrict unlawfully the rights and freedoms guaranteed to all States, the United States will continue to defend those rights and freedoms," the release said.

The release claimed China, Vietnam, and Taiwan require permission or advanced advanced notification before a foreign military vessel engages in "innocent passage" through the territorial sea – a violation of international maritime law.

However, the release made no mention of China's claim to own the entire waterway nor did it mention Beijing's creation of a series of military bases in the Spratly Islands on both sides of the sea.

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The release added that US forces will continue operations in the South China Sea on a daily basis and will to fly, sail and operate wherever international law allows – regardless of excessive maritime claims.

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Biden Promises Response in Kind to Cyberattack, Says 'Many Options' on Table

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - US President-elect Joe Biden vowed to respond "in kind" to a massive cyber attack widely attributed to Russia, which denies any involvement.

"I believe that when I learn the extent of the damage and the fact who is formally responsible they can be assured that we will respond, probably respond in kind," Biden said during a press conference.

President-elect, who takes over on January 20, added that he is considering "many options" that he would not currently elaborate on.

Biden told reporters that he "knows nothing that suggests that the situation is under control" and the question of the damage done "remains to be determined." He called on the international community to devise "rules of the road" that would constitute "appropriate behavior in cyber security."

"We have to bring along our allies and our friends so hold everyone accountable who breaches any of these basic fundamental rules," Biden said.

Last week, reports emerged that hundreds of US federal government entities and companies had been targeted by a massive cyber attack. US media and administration officials, including Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Attorney General William Barr, alleged that a hacking group with links to Russian intelligence was behind it but provided no evidence to back the allegation.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov has refuted these claims. On Saturday, President Donald Trump suggested China rather than Russia may be behind the cyberattacks. Trump also said the true scale of the cyberattacks had been exaggerated by the media and the situation was under control.

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Berlin Hopes Williams Remains UN Special Envoy for Libya - German Permanent Representative

UNITED NATIONS, December 22 (Sputnik) - Berlin hopes that Stephanie Williams, UN Acting Special Envoy for Libya, will stay in her post following the refusal of Nikolay Mladenov to assume the position, Germany's Permanent Representative to the United Nations Christoph Heusgen said in a press briefing on Tuesday.

"I just hope that Stephanie Williams, the Acting Special Representative, can be convinced of maybe staying on," Heusgen said.

Earlier in the day, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said that Special Coordinator for the Middle East peace process Mladenov in a letter to UN chief Antonio Guterres informed that he would not take up the role due to personal reasons and will resign from the United Nations after December 31.

Mladenov has long been considered for the position, and last week, the UN Security Council approved his appointment as a new Special Envoy for Libya.

Since March, Williams has been serving as Acting Special Envoy following the resignation of Ghassan Salame, who cited stress as the reason to step down.

"This is an extremely tough job, and I have to really commend what Stephanie Williams has done in the absence, after Ghassan Salame stepped down," Heusgen said.

Under Williams' leadership, Libya's warring parties - the Government of National Accord (GNA) and the Libyan National Army (LNA) - signed a nationwide ceasefire agreement on October 23 during the United Nations-facilitated commission talks in Geneva.

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Biden Says Cyberattack Constitutes Grave Risk to US Security, Was Carefully Planned

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"This attack constitutes a grave risk to our national security," Biden said at a press conference. "It was carefully planned and carefully orchestrated, it was carried out by using sophisticated cyber tools. The attackers succeeded in catching the federal government off guard and unprepared."

Biden said there is much still unknown about the scope and extent of the damage rendered by the massive cybersecurity breach.

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Biden Vows to Put Forward Another COVID-19 Relief Plan Early Next Year

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"Congress did its job this week and I can and I must ask them to do it again next year," Biden told a live-streamed briefing, referring to the near \$900 billion stimulus package passed this week for the pandemic. "I can and I must ask them to do it again next year. Even with the changes in approach I'm gonna put in place in late January, people are still going to be getting sick and dying from the COVID."

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US Army Plans Initial COVID-19 Vaccinations for Workers at Germany's Landstuhl Hospital

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) – Healthcare workers at Landstuhl Regional Medical, the largest US military hospital outside the United States, will be first to receive the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine under plans announced by the Army in a press release on Tuesday. "Frontline healthcare personnel at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center and first responders at heightened risk of exposure to individuals with COVID-19 are first in line to receive the vaccinations. Other Army MTFs [military treatment facilities] in Europe will also receive the Moderna vaccine in the coming weeks, based on the same tiered distribution plan," the release said.

Since the Moderna vaccine was approved by US regulators as an Emergency Use Authorization, all inoculations will be voluntary, the release said.

Apart from US military shipments, supplies from host nations are also expected to boost vaccine availability for American facilities in Europe, the release added.

Landstuhl has been used extensively to treat service members wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan.

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US Sues Retailer Walmart for Fueling Prescription Opioid Crisis - Justice Department

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The United States is suing retail giant Walmart for allegedly fueling the nation's opioid crisis by filling out illegitimate prescriptions at its pharmacies for such drugs, the Justice Department said in a statement on Tuesday.

"We entrust distributors and dispensers with the responsibility to ensure controlled substances do not fall into the wrong hands," Timothy Shea, Acting Administrator of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), said in the statement. "When processes to safeguard against drug diversion are violated or ignored, or when pharmacies routinely fill illegitimate prescriptions, we will hold accountable anyone responsible, including Walmart. Too many lives have been lost because of oversight failures and those entrusted with responsibility turning a blind eye."

Opioids are identified as a class of drugs naturally found in the opium poppy plant and that work in the brain to produce a variety of effects, including the relief of pain.

Jeffrey Bossert Clark, acting assistant attorney general of the Justice Department's civil division, said as one of the largest pharmacy chains and wholesale drug distributors in the country, Walmart had the responsibility and the means to help prevent the diversion of prescription opioids.

"Instead, for years, it did the opposite — filling thousands of invalid prescriptions at its pharmacies and failing to report suspicious orders of opioids and other drugs placed by those

pharmacies. This unlawful conduct contributed to the epidemic of opioid abuse throughout the United States. Today's filing represents an important step in the effort to hold Walmart accountable for such conduct," he said.

The Justice Department complaint alleges that Walmart's unlawful conduct resulted in hundreds of thousands of violations of the Controlled Substances Act (CSA). The department added that it seeks civil penalties that could total in the billions of dollars as well as injunctive relief.

"If Walmart is found liable for violating the CSA, it could face civil penalties of up to \$67,627 for each unlawful prescription filled and \$15,691 for each suspicious order not reported," the statement added.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, almost 450,000 people in the United States died between 1999 and 2018 from overdoses involving any opioid, including prescription and illicit opioids.

Walmart is the world's largest company by revenue, with \$514.41 billion, according to the Fortune Global 500 list in 2019. It is also the largest private employer in the world with 2.2 million employees.

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US Federal Reserve Tells Credit Suisse to Boost Anti-Money Laundering Policies

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve has directed Credit Suisse to strengthen its anti-money laundering policies after concerns emerged about customer risks in the Swiss banking group's operations in the United States, a written agreement between the two parties revealed on Tuesday.

The agreement showed that Credit Suisse had been told to increase oversight on "risk-based policies, procedures, and processes to gather and analyze customer information commensurate with the customer's risk profile," particularly with "categories of customers that pose a higher risk of money laundering or terrorist financing."

The enforcement order, reached jointly with the New York Department of Financial Services, comes in the aftermath of charges filed by Swiss prosecutors against Credit Suisse for alleged failings to circumvent the laundering of cocaine trafficking proceeds by a Bulgarian crime ring. Credit Suisse, responding to the charges, said it unreservedly rejected the allegations. A former employee of the bank had also been indicted over the matter in the Swiss Federal Criminal Court.

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Canada Enhances Measures to Screen Travelers From UK - Minister

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - Canada enhanced measures to screen travelers from the United Kingdom over coronavirus concerns, including those arriving from other countries, Canada's Public Safety Minister Bill Blair told reporters on Tuesday.

Around 40 countries have banned travel to and from the United Kingdom in recent days over the discovery of a new, potentially more transmissible strain of the coronavirus concentrated in capital city London and England's south east.

"Enhanced screening has been put in place at all Canadian airports at all points of entrance for travelers who may be arriving from the UK indirectly," Blair said during press briefing.

All the travelers would be screened if they have been in the United Kingdom in the past 14 days, he also said.

"If they have, they are referred to Public Health Agency of Canada at both land and airports of entry," Blair added.

Canada recently closed its border to all flights from the UK, and currently reviewing additional measures that may be required, the minister reminded. "All international travelers entering Canada are subjects for screening," he explained.

UK Health Secretary Matt Hancock said a week ago that a new coronavirus strain had been identified in roughly 1,000 individuals in southeast England. The new strain, later identified as VUI-202012/01, is believed to be more easily transmitted than previously identified strains of the virus.

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Twitter to Give Biden US President's Accounts with Deleted Followers - Campaign Official

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - Twitter will delete all of the tens of millions followers from the two official presidential accounts before turning them over from Donald Trump to Joe Biden, the Biden campaign's digital director Rob Flaherty said on Tuesday.

"Twitter has informed us that as of right now the Biden administration will have to start from zero," Flaherty tweeted.

He said that in 2016, the policy was different with Trump absorbing all of President Barack Obama's Twitter followers on @POTUS and @WhiteHouse.

Both accounts have 59.2 million followers combined, significantly fewer than a 88.5 million audience @realDonaldTrump - the incumbent's personal account.

The Hill quoted Twitter spokesperson Nicholas Pacilio as saying he could not confirm Flaherty's statement. He added that the social media platform is still discussing the transfer of the accounts with Biden's team.

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New Strain of COVID-19 Likely Already in US, Undetected - Health Agency

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The newly identified mutant strain of COVID-19 discovered in the United Kingdom has not yet been detected in the United States but could already be present in the country, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention warned on Tuesday.

"The VUI 202012/01 variant has not been identified through sequencing efforts in the United States, although viruses have only been sequenced from about 51,000 of the 17 million US cases," the CDC said in an update on the implications of the new strain. "Ongoing travel between the United Kingdom and the United States, as well as the high prevalence of this variant among current UK infections, increase the likelihood of importation. Given the small fraction of US infections that have been sequenced, the variant could already be in the United States without having been detected."

UK Health Secretary Matt Hancock said one week ago that a new strain of COVID-19 had been identified in roughly 1,000 individuals in southeast England. The new variant, later identified as VUI-202012/01, is believed to be more easily transmitted than previously identified strains of the disease.

Top US pandemics expert Dr. Anthony Fauci said during an interview with the ABC interview network on Tuesday that he would not be surprised if the new strain of the coronavirus was already in the United States.

"When you have this amount of spread within a place like the UK, you really need to assume that it's here already," Fauci told the network. "And certainly is not the dominant strain, but I would not be surprised at all if it's already here."

The United States has been the country hardest hit by the COVID-19 since its global outbreak this year, with more than 18 million positive cases logged since January and more than 320,000 deaths related to the virus. After a respite in the summer to early fall period, infections have starting surging again, pushing hospitalization up to daily record highs of above 100,000 in recent weeks.

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Newborns Gain Protection From COVID-19 When Moms Gets Sick in 3rd Trimester - Health Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - Babies born to women who test positive for the novel coronavirus during the final trimester of pregnancy will most likely be disease free when they enter the world, the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) reported on Tuesday based on a recent study.

"The study followed 127 pregnant women who were admitted to Boston hospitals during the spring of 2020. Among the 64 pregnant women who tested positive for SARS-CoV-2, no newborns tested positive for the virus," an NIH press release said.

The study was limited to women in the third trimester because data on women infected during the first and second trimesters are still being collected, the release added.

Researchers found that pregnant women who were positive to the coronavirus had detectable levels of virus in respiratory fluids like saliva, nasal and throat secretions, but no virus in the placenta, according to the release.

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California Secretary of State Padilla to Fill Harris' Seat in US Senate - Governor

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - California Secretary of State Alex Padilla will fill Vice President-elect Kamala Harris' vacant seat in the US Senate, Governor Gavin Newsom's office said in a press release on Tuesday.

"Governor Gavin Newsom today announced the selection of California Secretary of State Alex Padilla to be California's next United States Senator, filling the term being vacated by Vice President-elect Kamala Harris," the release said.

Padilla has previously served as a city councilman in Los Angeles and a state senator in California, the release added.

The new incoming Congress will be sworn in on January 3, 2021.

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Pompeo, Barzani Discuss Regional Security, Potential Budget Deal - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Iraqi Kurdistan Region Prime Minister Masrour Barzani discussed over the telephone regional security issues and efforts to reach an acceptable budget agreement with Baghdad, Principal Deputy Spokesperson Cale Brown said in a readout of the conversation on Tuesday.

"The Secretary and Prime Minister Barzani discussed regional security challenges, de-escalation at the border, and the need for continued, close cooperation between the Coalition, United States, Government of Iraq, and the Kurdistan Regional Government," Brown said.

Brown noted the US secretary of state said the United States appreciate the efforts by both Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government to reach a budget deal.

Pompeo also urged all sides to remain committed to a fair outcome, the spokesperson added.

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South Carolina Governor Tests Positive for Coronavirus - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The governor of the US state of South Carolina has tested positive for the novel coronavirus and has voluntarily entered isolation, along with his wife, his office announced in a statement on Tuesday.

"Governor Henry McMaster Tests Positive for COVID-19," the press office of the Governor of South Carolina;s office announced in a Twitter message.

"Governor McMaster is experiencing mild symptoms, isolating with the First Lady at home." The governor and his wife are both 73 years old, making them both higher risk patients in contracting the virus.

"The governor has declared a state of emergency throughout the state, the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control said, also on Tuesday.

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US Goals in Syria Unlikely to Change Under New Biden Administration - Envoy

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The United States is likely to continue pursuing the same goals in Syria under the incoming Biden administration as they have a broad bipartisan support, US Special Envoy for Syria in Joel Rayburn told reporters on Tuesday.

"It's not a Trump administration policy, this is the policy of the United States that has broad bipartisan support," Rayburn said during a telephone briefing.

Rayburn said the stated US goals in Syria are achieving an enduring defeat of terrorists, the withdrawal of all Iranian forces and militias and promoting a political solution to the conflict in the country under UN Security Council resolution 2254.

"So I think that those goals already have a consensus behind them in Washington and really don't think you are going to see a significant change away from those goals," Rayburn said.

"There are different people who will come into different positions, they can have good ideas about how to implement those goals better, but I don't think you are going to see a discarding of those goals."

The international community can count on the United States as well as other like-minded countries to continue seeking those goals regardless of who is the White House, Rayburn added.

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UN Chief Appoints US Diplomat as Deputy Special Envoy for Kosovo Mission - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, December 22 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres appointed US diplomat Barrie Lynne Freeman as the Deputy Special Representative for the UN Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Tuesday.

"The United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres today announced the appointment of Barrie Lynne Freeman of the United States as his Deputy Special Representative for the UNMIK," Dujarric said.

Freeman brings to the position over 30 years of experience in international peace and security, serving as Deputy Head and Political Director in the Peacebuilding Support Office of the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs. She also served as Chief of Staff and, before that, Director of Political Affairs of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic.

In another appointment, Guterres assigned Mari Yamashita of Japan to serve as his Representative and Director of the United Nations Office in Belgrade, Serbia.

Yamashita will oversee the United Nations Office's activities in support of the UNMIK with regard to regional developments relevant to the work of the mission.

Yamashita has over 30 years of experience working on peace and security, preventative diplomacy and peacebuilding both at the UN headquarters in New York and in the field.

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Nearly Half of Americans Believe COVID-19 Vaccines 'Safe,' 'Effective' - Poll

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - A 49 percent plurality of US adults consider coronavirus vaccines authorized for emergency use are both safe and effective, a Rasmussen Reports poll said on Tuesday.

"Just 49 percent of American adults believe the new anti-COVID-19 vaccine will be safe and effective. Twenty-one percent (21 percent) do not, while 30 percent are not sure," a press release summarizing the poll said.

In addition, 62 percent of those surveyed said they are likely to get the vaccine when it becomes available, compared with 65 percent in a Rasmussen poll last month and 70 percent who said the same when Rasmussen first asked the question in April, according to the release.

The poll demonstrated fluctuating acceptance of COVID-19 vaccinations has in recent months reflected in multiple polls.

For example, Gallup reported in October that 58 percent of Americans were willing to get the vaccine, up from a low of 50 percent in a September, which reflected an 11 point drop in vaccine acceptance from August.

An estimated 2 million doses of the Pfizer vaccine and 5.9 million doses of the Moderna vaccine are expected to be delivered this week, including on Christmas Day, according to US officials.

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RPT - Mladenov Rejects UN Libya Envoy Role, Resigns From UN - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, December 22 (Sputnik) - UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Nikolay Mladenov informed UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres that he will not assume the position of the special envoy for Libya and will resign from the United Nations when his term ends on December 31, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Tuesday.

"On Monday, Nikolay Mladenov informed the Secretary-General that when his term as a Special Coordinator for the Middle East peace process ends on December 31, he will resign from the United Nations and will not be able to take up the position of the Special Envoy for Libya, for which as you know he has been considered," Dujarric said.

The spokesman added that Mladenov's decision was taken due to personal and family reasons, and the resignation letter "was not part of the plan."

Last week, the UN Security Council approved the appointment of Mladenov as a new Special Envoy for Libya.

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US to Continue Maintain Economic, Political Pressure on Syria - Envoy

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The United States will remain committed to its policy of economic and political pressure on the government of Syria, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State and Special Envoy for Syria Joel Rayburn told reporters on Tuesday.

"I want to reiterate that the United States remains committed to carrying out a sustained campaign of economic and political pressure to prevent the Assad regime and its supporters from massive resources to fuel their war against the Syrian people," Rayburn said during telephonic press briefing.

Earlier on Tuesday, the US Treasury Department announced new sanctions against a group of Syrian individuals and entities, including Central Bank officials.

"These individuals and corrupt businesses are impeding efforts to reach a political and peaceful resolution to the Syrian conflict, as called by the UN Security Council Resolution 2254," Rayburn said.

New bunch of sanctions demonstrates Washington's resolve to curtail ability of Syrian government and its allies from continuing a war, the envoy added.

Rayburn also noted that the United States will continue designating Syrians outside Syria if they are violating Washington's sanctions laws.

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Russia Expects Biden to Soon Start Returning to Compliance With JCPOA - Deputy Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, December 22 (Sputnik) - Russia expects the incoming administration of US President-elect Joe Biden to undertake steps soon to return the United States to full compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on the Iranian nuclear program, Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy told the UN Security Council on Tuesday.

"No one has asked the United States to act as a world policeman, and the attempts to do that look anachronistic today, as does the reckless and arrogant policy of resorting to unilateral pressure," Polyanskiy said. "Therefore, the most logical step on behalf of the United States now would be a full and unconditional return to full compliance with JCPOA. And we do expect that the new American administration realizes that and will undertake the right steps in this direction in the very near future."

In September, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced that all previously lifted United Nations sanctions against Iran were brought back into effect under the snapback mechanism of UN Security Council Resolution 2231. The statement was rejected as false by Russia, a permanent member of the UN Security Council, and the European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell, the coordinator of the JCPOA.

The JCPOA was signed in 2015 by Iran, Russia, France, China, Germany, the United Kingdom, the United States and the European Union. Under the terms of the agreement, Iran had to scale back its nuclear program and significantly downgrade its uranium reserves in exchange for sanctions relief.

In 2018, US President Donald Trump withdrew the United States from JCPOA and began re-introducing sanctions against Iran, which in turn discontinued its own obligations under the agreement.

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US Sanctions Syria's Central Bank, 9 Other Entities, 7 Individuals - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The United States has added Syria's Central Bank, seven Syrians including a high-ranking official and nine Syrian entities to its Specially Designated and Nationals and Blocked Persons List (SDN List), the Treasury Department announced in a press release on Tuesday.

"The US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned a high-ranking official in the Syrian government; her husband, a member of the Syrian People's Assembly; and their business entities," the release said. "In total, OFAC added two individuals, nine business entities, and the Central Bank of Syria to the SDN List, pursuant to Syria sanctions authorities."

The Treasury Department explained that the latest sanctions target senior Syrian official Lina Mohammed Nazir al-Kinayeh, who serves in the Office of the Syrian Presidency.

"This office follows up on the files and decisions of the Presidential Palace's Anti-Corruption Committee, which Assad directly supervises, using judicial, advisory, and administrative authorities under its jurisdiction," it said. "Closely aligned with the Assad regime as a high-ranking official in the Presidential Palace, al-Kinayeh has conducted a range of business and personal activities on behalf of Syrian First Lady Asma al-Assad and previously headed the Office of the First Lady of Syria."

The Treasury Department said it has also sanctioned Al-Kinayeh's husband - Mohammed Hammam Mohammed Adnan Masouti.

"Masouti is a member of the Syrian People's Assembly's Arab and Foreign Affairs Committee and he has also served as the Director of the Educational Hospitals Directorate in the Ministry of Higher Education, which reportedly enabled his corruption in Syria's hospital system as well as self-serving deals with the support of his wife," the release said. "Masouti's connections to the Assad regime through his wife, as well as his businesses and vast financial holdings, make Masouti an unusually influential parliamentarian."

In addition, the Treasury Department said it has sanctioned four companies - Souran Company, Lia Company, Letia Company and Polymedics LLC - that are owned or controlled by al-Kinayeh or Masouti.

The latest sanctions target five entities identified as blocked property of Amer Taysir Khiti or Khiti Holding Group, previously sanctioned by the United States, the release said.

The newly added business entities include Al-Amer for Manufacture of Concrete and Flagstone, Al-Amer for Manufacture of Plastic, Al-Layth Alzahabe Transportation and Shipping Services, Al-Amer Development and Real Estate Investment and Good Land Company, the release said. "OFAC additionally added the Central Bank of Syria (CBoS) to the SDN List, highlighting its blocked status," the release said. "The CBoS is already blocked as meeting the definition of the Government of Syria in E.O. 13582 and the Syrian Sanctions Regulations, 31 C.F.R. Part 542."

On December 9, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Joel Rayburn said at a congressional hearing that more Syria-related sanctions could be applied before President Donald Trump leaves office.

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Top US Health Officials Receive Moderna's COVID-19 Vaccine in Televised Broadcast

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - US epidemiologist Dr. Anthony Fauci and Health Secretary Alex Azar both received their first dose of the coronavirus in a televised ceremony at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) on Tuesday.

"It is important that everyone gets this vaccine so that we can have a veil of protection over this country that can end this pandemic," Fauci, the 79-year-old director of the National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) said. "I want to encourage everyone who has the opportunity to get vaccinated."

Azar said the new vaccines now being distributed would save thousands of American lives.

"I am so pleased to be here for the kick off and I am pleased to be receiving this vaccine myself. It is nothing short of miraculous but when we need to look for a medical miracle we know where to look. ... This is one of your finest accomplishments ... This should reinvigorate our optimism about medical science," Azar said.

Fauci, Azar and NIH Director Francis Collins, who also took the vaccine, were then monitored for 30 minutes to ensure there was no adverse reaction. A second dose of the vaccine must be administered after 28 days.

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UN Human Rights Expert Urges Trump to Pardon Julian Assange - Open Letter

UNITED NATIONS, December 22 (Sputnik) - UN Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment Nils Melzer called in a letter on Tuesday on US President Donald Trump to pardon Julian Assange, the founder of the WikiLeaks website, who is currently imprisoned in the United Kingdom.

"Mr. President, today, I respectfully request that you pardon Mr. Julian Assange," Melzer said.

"Mr. Assange has been arbitrarily deprived of his liberty for the past ten years. This is a high price to pay for the courage to publish true information about government misconduct throughout the world."

Assange is currently pending extradition to the United States on 17 espionage charges, potentially punishable by a 175-year prison term. The US Justice Department is also seeking the extradition of the WikiLeaks founder on one count of computer misuse for the publication of

classified information on the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and thousands of US diplomatic cables between 2010 and 2011.

Judgment on his extradition will be handed down on January 4, 2021, but depending on the outcome, it is possible that the case will go before several UK courts before it is concluded. Melzer said he had visited Assange at the Belmarsh High Security Prison in London with two independent medical doctors and could attest that his health had seriously deteriorated, putting his life in danger.

Assange's respiratory condition renders him extremely vulnerable to the COVID-19 disease, which has recently broken out in the facility where he is being held, the expert said.

Melzer also said Assange should be granted pardon because he has never published false information, nor has he hacked or stolen data. Assange obtained the information he published from authentic sources in the same way any other investigative reporter conduct their work, Melzer said.

"In pardoning Mr. Assange, Mr. President... you would rehabilitate a courageous man who has suffered injustice, persecution and humiliation for more than a decade, simply for telling the truth," Melzer said.

Ten years ago, WikiLeaks released the largest leak of classified documents in history, with hundreds of thousands of diplomatic cables and files exposing atrocities committed by US troops during military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

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US Navy Orders Sea Skimming Supersonic Missiles to Test Ship Defenses - Northrop Grumman

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The US signed a production contract for 19 supersonic Coyote missiles for target practice on Navy ships, with an option to purchase an additional 84 projectiles that fly more than three times the speed of sound, Northrop Grumman said in a press release on Tuesday.

"The Coyote provides the Navy with a cost-effective target to simulate advanced supersonic anti-ship cruise missile threats. It can be used as a Mach 2.5+ sea skimming target or as a Mach 3.5+ diving target from an altitude of 52,000 feet," the release said.

Northrop Grumman designed, developed and first flew the Coyote in 2003. The company has since delivered 124 targets to the US Navy and successfully launched them 79 times.

Successful demonstrations of hypersonic weapons by Russia and China in recent years prompted the United States to revive a mothballed hypersonic program of its own in a bid to match offensive and defensive capabilities of the two potential adversaries.

US military planners cite a need to defend against and deter the use of hypersonic missiles capable of traveling at more than ten times the speed of sound (about 760 miles per hour times 10), and therefore able to overwhelm existing missile defense systems.

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Two US Lawmakers Urge Tougher Trade Restrictions on China's Chipmaker SMIC - Letter

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - US Senator Marco Rubio and Congressmen Michael McCaul on Tuesday sent a letter to Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross urging imposing tougher restrictions on China's biggest chipmaker SMIC so as to deny it access to semiconductor manufacturing equipment from any location in the world.

Rubio and McCaul argued in the letter that the Entity List designation was not strict enough and should be rewritten so as to close "dangerous loopholes."

"We are deeply concerned that SMIC's placement on the Entity List by the Bureau of Industry and Security was done for show and parochial commercial interests at the expense of US national security," the lawmakers wrote. "The SMIC Entity List rule must be rewritten immediately to close these dangerous loopholes that would allow nearly all sales to SMIC to continue without restriction and support the CCP's [Chinese Communist Party's] stated goal of military preeminence."

In addition, Rubio and McCaul urged the Commerce Department to expand the Foreign-Produced Direct Product Rule for SMIC to cover "any semiconductor manufacturing equipment that is built with or incorporates any US-origin technology."

"We must ensure that SMIC is unable to access semiconductor manufacturing equipment from any location in the world," the letter said.

The Commerce Department said in a statement that it has added more than 60 companies, including SMIC, to the "entity list," which requires US technologies companies to apply for special licenses when dealing with companies on the list. The "entity list" currently covers about 700 companies, 296 of which are Chinese.

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"The US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned a high-ranking official in the Syrian government; her husband, a member of the Syrian People's Assembly; and their business entities," the release said. "In total, OFAC added two individuals, nine business entities, and the Central Bank of Syria to the SDN List, pursuant to Syria sanctions authorities."

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Acting US Defense Chief Pays Unannounced Visit to Afghanistan- Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - Acting US Defense Secretary Christopher Miller has payed an unannounced visit to Afghanistan as the United States draws down troops from that country, the Defense Department announced in a press release on Tuesday.

"Acting Secretary of Defense Christopher C. Miller traveled to Afghanistan on Tuesday, December 22. Due to security concerns surrounding this trip, it was not announced in advance," the release said.

The Defense Department said Miller met with Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani in Kabul to discuss the ongoing US military support for the Afghan government.

"Acting Secretary Miller also met with General Scott Miller, Commander Resolute Support Mission (RS) and US Forces Afghanistan (USFOR-A) to gain his assessment of the overall security situation to include the current counterterrorism and Train, Advise and Assist missions, the level of Taliban violence and the ongoing drawdown of US forces," the release added.

Earlier in December, US Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) Chairman Gen. Mark Milley met separately with representatives of the Taliban movement to press them to commit to a reduction of violence. Milley is the first known JCS chief to have met with Taliban officials.

Intra-Afghan peace negotiations began in Qatar in September. Both sides have recently announced that they agreed on the framework of the talks, allowing for discussions on substantive issues to begin. At the same time, violent clashes between the Afghan forces and the radical movement, as well as bomb blasts, continue to ravage Afghanistan.

In early November, the US announced plans to reduce by January 15 the number of its troops to 2,500 each in Afghanistan and Iraq.

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Alaska Airlines Expands 737-Max Fleet as Aircraft Re-Enters Service - Boeing

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - Alaska Airlines placed orders to nearly double the size of its 737-MAX fleet of 68 aircraft, as safety upgrades following two deadly crashes allow the plane to return to service, the manufacturer Boeing said in a press release on Tuesday.

"The new agreement announced today will add 23 firm orders for the 737-9 and more options for future purchases. In all, Alaska will have 52 options which, if fully exercised, would take the carrier to as many as 120 737 MAX airplanes," the release said.

The new order, plus a November agreement by Alaska Airlines to lease 13 jets, will boost the size of the carrier's planned 737-Max fleet to 68, compared with the original order of 32 planes placed in 2012, the release said.

Last month, the Federal Aviation Administration allowed the plane to fly after being grounded for nearly two years following crashes in Indonesia and Ethiopia that killed 346 passengers and crew.

US airlines, including Alaska, have announced plans to gradually re-introduce the plane to commercial service in first quarter of 2021.

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Israel-US Delegation Arrives in Morocco After Signing Peace Deal

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - An official US-Israeli delegation arrived on Tuesday on a landmark visit to Morocco on the first direct flight from Tel Aviv to Rabat, according to online flight tracking services.

The joint delegation is led by White House senior adviser Jared Kushner, who arrived in Israel the day before, and Israeli National Security Council head Meir Ben-Shabbat. The delegation is due to sign the first package of documents on cooperation between Israel and Morocco under the recently reached agreement to normalize relations.

US President Donald Trump announced at the start of December that he had brokered a peace deal between Israel and Morocco, which entails the establishment of full diplomatic relations and air travel between the two nations, as well as the United States' recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over the Western Sahara.

Morocco became the fourth Arab state to normalize ties with Israel this year after the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Sudan.

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UN Human Rights Expert Urges Trump to Pardon Julian Assange - Open Letter

UNITED NATIONS, December 22 (Sputnik) - UN Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment Nils Melzer in a letter on Tuesday called on US President Donald Trump to pardon Julian Assange, the founder of the WikiLeaks website, who is currently imprisoned in the United Kingdom.

"Mr. President, today, I respectfully request that you pardon Mr. Julian Assange," Melzer said.

"Mr. Assange has been arbitrarily deprived of his liberty for the past ten years. This is a high price to pay for the courage to publish true information about government misconduct throughout the world."

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CORRECTION - Trump Signs \$1.4Trln Spending Package That Includes \$900Bln in COVID-19 Relief

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump has signed a bill on Tuesday extending budget for six days follow the passage of a \$1.4 trillion federal spending package for 2021 by The US House of Representatives and the Senate.

"On Tuesday, December 22, 2020, the President signed into law: H.R. 1520, the 'Further Extension of Continuing Appropriations Act, 2021,' which provides fiscal year (FY) 2021 appropriations to Federal agencies through Monday, December 28, 2020, for continuing projects and activities of the Federal Government.

The two houses of Congress on Monday night passed a \$1.4 trillion federal spending package for 2021 that includes \$900 billion in coronavirus relief after it was passed by the House of Representatives and the Senate, the White House said in a statement on Tuesday. Trump is expected to sign the legislation before the stopgap funding measure expires.

The COVID-19 relief package includes \$300 weekly unemployment benefits, as well as \$600 stimulus checks for qualifying adults and children in the United States.

The funding legislation includes \$696 billion for defense spending and renews a \$290 million budget for the "countering Russian influence fund."

The bill also includes \$275 million in security assistance to Ukraine in addition to \$453 million in aid to the country for other activities not related to defense. The legislation also includes \$132 million in aid to Georgia.

Lawmakers allocated another \$15.35 billion for US nuclear weapons activities, an increase of \$2.9 billion above the 2020 level, to maintain nuclear deterrence and to fund Research and Development capabilities.

The legislation also includes \$710 million for efforts to counter the Islamic State terrorist group (banned in Russia), including support for the Iraqi Security Forces, Kurdish Peshmerga, and the Syrian Democratic Forces fighting the Islamic State terrorist group.

A separate summary of the bill states that no funds from the 2021 spending package will be used to exercise the United States' control over any oil resources in Iraq or Syria.

The bill also provides \$160 million for programs with countries in the Africa Command area of responsibility, \$56 million above the budget request. It also provides \$120 million for programs with countries in the Southern Command area of responsibility, \$46 million above the budget request.

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Acting US Defense Chief Pays Unannounced Visit to Afghanistan - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - Acting US Defense Secretary Christopher Miller has paid an unannounced visit to Afghanistan as the United States draws down troop numbers in the country, the Pentagon announced in a press release on Tuesday.

"Acting Secretary of Defense Christopher C. Miller traveled to Afghanistan on Tuesday, December 22. Due to security concerns surrounding this trip, it was not announced in advance," the release said.

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US Revises Q3 GDP Upward to 33.4% In Third Reading - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The US economy grew by 33.4 percent in the third quarter, the Commerce Department said Tuesday, revising upward its previously estimated growth of 33.1 percent for the period as business activity picked up from the impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

"Real gross domestic product (GDP) increased at an annual rate of 33.4 percent in the third quarter of 2020, as efforts continued to reopen businesses and resume activities that were postponed or restricted due to COVID-19," the department's Bureau of Economic Analysis said in a statement. It was the third reading of the Q3 GDP data since an advanced estimate released on November 25.

The Q3 GDP was the highest ever attained by the United States for a three-month period. It comes after the second quarter plunge of 31.4 percent — which also marks the steepest drop ever for a three-month period, due to business lockdowns forced by the coronavirus pandemic between April and June.

Despite the third quarter rebound, the US economic outlook remains dire with a rash of new infections reported across a nation with 18 million COVID-19 cases since January and almost 320,000 fatalities. US COVID-19 hospitalizations have hit daily record highs of above 100,000 in recent weeks, even as vaccine developments for the virus have shown promise.

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Trump Signs \$1.4Trln Spending Package That Includes \$900Bln in COVID-19 Relief

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The two houses of Congress passed the legislation on Monday night.

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Israel, Lebanon 'Remain Far Apart' in US-Mediated Talks on Maritime Boundary - Pompeo

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - Israel and Lebanon remain far apart in US-mediated negotiations on their maritime border, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Tuesday.

"Regrettably, despite goodwill on both sides, the parties remain far apart," Pompeo said. He added that the US remains ready to mediate constructive discussions and urged both sides to negotiate "based on the respective maritime claims both have previously deposited at the United Nations."

The talks seek to resolve an overlap between the two rival nations' territorial waters and exclusive economic zones over an area of roughly 330 square miles that is situated over large oil and gas deposits beneath the Mediterranean seabed.

Since Hezbollah-dominated Lebanon does not recognize the state of Israel, negotiations are held indirectly with US and UN mediation.

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YEAR IN REVIEW - Black Lives Matter Protests Rock US Political Landscape, Yet Lead to Limited Reforms

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The year 2020 was marked by social upheaval and attempts to reinvent America, including through the pain and passion of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement - a nationwide wave of protests in the name of racial equity and opposition to police violence.

What started as an outburst of anger against a random case of police brutality grew to claim a prominent place in a centuries-long struggle for emancipation of communities of color, drawing a direct ancestry line to epic victories over slavery and segregation.

Intrinsically woven into an unprecedented tangle of 2020 crises, the BLM movement tapped its rage from coronavirus pandemic disparities, fed on quarantine constraints, was exploited by warring political camps for electoral gains and used them in return.

SAY HIS NAME

The wheels of history were set in motion on May 25 when Derek Chauvin, a Minneapolis policeman, used a chokehold detention technique on George Floyd, an African American man suspected of passing a \$20 counterfeit bill. The officer knelt on his neck, pinning it to the ground for nearly eight minutes, as Floyd begged for mercy until he became unresponsive.

"I can't breathe," the man's final words, made a rallying cry for many thousands of Americans who took to the streets from coast to coast, shocked and infuriated by the torment that was captured on video in every disturbing detail.

"Say his name!" chanted crowds in New York and Philadelphia. "George Floyd!" responded Seattle and Los Angeles.

"Defund the police!" demanded protesters whose appearance at the very gates of the White House reportedly prompted the Secret Service to hastily evacuate President Donald Trump to a safe bunker.

More than 7,750 BLM demonstrations were held in 2,440 locations across all 50 US states and the nation's capital during the 90 days following Floyd's death, according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED).

BLM became one of the largest protest movements in US history partly due to socioeconomic factors, which were exacerbated by a pandemic that hit African Americans disproportionately hard due to their working in front-line jobs, earning less and lacking access to adequate healthcare, researchers have said.

Protesters were mobilized by Floyd's death, but demanded justice for other African American victims in 2020, such as Breonna Taylor, 26, who was shot during a police raid in Louisville,

Kentucky after her boyfriend fired upon officers. They also demanded justice for Ahmaud Arbery, a 25-year old Black man murdered by three white residents while jogging in Georgia. Even as the campaign went on, more names were appearing on the remembrance list - from Rayshard Brooks killed in Atlanta to Jacob Blake shot seven times and severely wounded by police in Kenosha, Wisconsin.

Devoid of a unified command and coherent agenda, protests across the country pressed mostly for the lowest common denominator - a prosecution of culprits and sweeping police reforms - something some federal and state authorities swiftly committed to. However, they stopped short of slashing law-enforcement budgets as many activists demanded.

"Instead of using strange men with guns to inflict violence on people you reduce harm and prevent it ahead of time by serving people, keeping their basic needs met, creating community-oriented solutions that doesn't involve men with guns arresting people," an activist in rebellious Portland told Sputnik when asked to explain the concept behind calls for defunding police.

However, "defunding police" may have sounded like a grand rallying cry for protesters, there was a huge gap between reform theory and practice. The Minneapolis city council, for example, reversed its decision to dismantle the police after a 25% spike in violent crime. Instead, the city ended up cutting the police budget by less than 5 percent.

Many BLM activists have a more ambitious goal in mind though. They seek to eradicate the remnants of racist mentality and behavior still permeating American society.

"Getting in an elevator with a white person, you can see the fear by the look on their face. You can see it when you walk to a shopping mall and they get over to the other side of the street. You can see they clasp their purse, lock their doors when they pull out next to you waiting for a bus on the street corner," a black resident of Houston, Texas, told Sputnik on the fringes of Floyd's funeral.

"Microaggressions" they speak about sound like a routine evil, not brazen enough to make headlines, but it poisons - drop by drop - everyday lives of many African Americans, who are less and less eager to condone it.

RAGE AND TEARS

Demonstrations often devolved into violent clashes between protesters and police, with members of the media at times finding themselves targeted by both sides.

A Russian reporter was hit by a non-lethal projectile on a night of riots in front of the White House - a foam-tipped sponge bullet - as big as a champagne cork. It did not penetrate the skin but left a visible bruise. It marked the journalist's first frontline injury in a career that included covering the Second Lebanon war, a military coup in Egypt, and multiple rounds of hostilities in the Gaza Strip.

His compatriots and colleagues were attacked, beaten and had their equipment destroyed by law enforcement officers during clashes in Portland. Another crew from a major Russian broadcaster survived an attack of a marauding gang in Philadelphia that was pillaging a footwear store on the margins of citywide demonstrations against another instance of law enforcement brutality.

Protests were frequently hijacked by radicals, marred by violence and looting, police overreaction or inaction. It took the authorities three days to quench the unrest in Washington, DC by enforcing a curfew and deploying thousands of National Guard soldiers, Secret Service

and Drug Enforcement agents, Border Protection officers, and policemen of all stripes. They patrolled streets, closed major intersections, isolated neighborhoods, dispersed crowds and pushed their remains away from the White House.

The capital police came under fire by some critics for allegedly being on the defensive at best, allowing violent rioters to reach the gates of the presidential compound, torch buildings, burn cars, smash windows and vandalize historic landmarks in the heart of city.

Supporters of the protests often downplayed the millions of dollars' worth of damage rendered by rioters and looters who destroyed property, stole merchandise and forced businesses to close. Or they justified the wreckage as a necessary byproduct of fighting police injustice.

"We are tired of this shit. Police brutality over and over again," two African-Americans in similar balaclavas and assault vests told Sputnik after protesters crushed with wooden sticks a Mercedes sedan. "If I die by the police, burn America down. They say George Floyd didn't want it. How do they know? Did he write it down somewhere?"

In Seattle, BLM protesters established around an abandoned police precinct an "autonomous zone," independent of government control. The city authorities were initially supportive of the experiment, but three weeks later forcefully reclaimed the area when it spawned an upsurge of criminal violence, including four shootings that left two teenagers dead.

Federal law enforcement agents were deployed to Portland, the whitest city in the United States, to protect court buildings from a handful of anarchists. However, they alienated the entire city by tear-gassing, beating, arresting and shooting indiscriminately scores of people - peaceful and violent protesters, journalists, volunteer medics, and human right activists.

Thousands would turn out for nightly demonstrations that embraced BLM rhetoric and aesthetics until the contingent was withdrawn.

Tensions were further exacerbated across the country when counter-protesters stepped in to defend communities and back the police, whom they believe needed help because their hands were tied by the politicians. According to ACLED, over 360 counter-protests were recorded around the country, of which 43 - nearly 12 percent - turned violent.

A Sputnik reporter observed hundreds of antiracism protesters and self-defined "American patriots" from predominantly white militias confronting each other in central Louisville. Both sides wielded an impressive array of fire arms with magazines attached, but didn't go beyond verbal barbs and occasional fist fights in the stunning absence of the police.

"The police get their orders from the government and have been told several times to stand down. They can't show force," a militiaman, who introduced himself as Squelch, said. "Guess what? We are not police - we are allowed to speak out, to say 'Enough is enough.'"

Altercations did not always stay bloodless, however. In Kenosha a 17-year-old militiaman shot and killed two protesters who apparently attacked him. In Portland a member of the right-wing Patriot Prayer group was shot dead by a suspect allegedly associated with the Antifa movement.

More recently, dozens of members from the Proud Boys, a far-right wing movement, easily recognizable in their yellow and black outfits, spearheaded two major rallies in Washington, DC in support of Trump's bid to overturn the election defeat. Both times they engaged in massive hand-to-hand brawls with equally belligerent BLM and Antifa activists.

A popular perception of BLM as an essentially violent phenomenon is not supported by scientific data though. ACLED study claims that more than 93 percent of all summer protests were peaceful with "violent demonstrations" reported from fewer than 220 locations.

Researchers attribute the aberration to "the media focus on looting and vandalism."

VOTE LIKE NEVER BEFORE

The BLM movement predictably became a major issue in the 2020 Presidential race with Joe Biden and his Democratic camp seen as sympathetic to protesters' demands while their Republican rivals, including Trump, focused more on the "law and order" agenda - an upsurge of violence and the need to counter it.

On the campaign trail, Biden would comfort victims of police brutality and running mate Kamala Harris, a Black, Asian American woman, addressed one the largest BLM demonstration timed to Martin Luther King's March on Washington.

During protest events political activists would routinely urge everyone to vote "like we never voted before," use mail-in ballots and assist neighbors in coming to polling stations.

Pro-Biden mainstream media were frequently criticized for overlooking and downplaying violent riots, while outlets sympathetic to the incumbent, fewer in number and weaker in voice, were accused of sowing fears among well-off suburban dwellers and ignoring fundamental causes of the BLM movement.

Trump himself chose sides when 25 minutes before a curfew he sent the police to disperse a demonstration near the White House. Law enforcement used flash bangs, pepper spray and sheer physical force on the crowd, all in order to secure passage for a presidential photo-op at the historic St John's Episcopal church that had caught fire during earlier riots.

ACLED estimated that Trump during the year 2020 ordered over 55 federal and National Guard deployments across the country. He ruthlessly criticized governors, mostly from the Democratic Party, who refused to cooperate with his law and order effort and sought to outlaw Antifa as a terrorist organization.

Trump also seized on the issue of cultural wars when protesters mounted attacks on monuments seen as celebrating America's colonial and racism legacy and even attempted to knock down President Andrew Jackson's equestrian figure in front of the White House. He issued an executive order authorizing federal agents to pursue demonstrators who pulled down statues, putting a lid on the phenomenon that threatened to spare neither Christopher Columbus nor Abraham Lincoln.

Russian historical monuments were also targeted. In July, Alaska's Sitka adopted a resolution to relocate the statue of explorer and city founder Alexander Baranov after a group of local activists called for its removal, citing mistreatment of indigenous peoples during the colonial era. Baranov founded Sitka in 1799, then called Novo-Archangelsk, as the capital of the Russian colonies in North America. In October, the Baranov statue was moved from its downtown location to the Sitka Historical Society Museum.

Symbolically, Washingtonians celebrated en masse Biden's victory over Trump at a newly founded BLM Square - the 16th and H streets intersection, a few thousand feet away from the White House. The same motto - Black Lives Matter - is painted in giant yellow letters on the pavement.

From the outset the president-elect had stayed true to his promise to address equality issues and is compiling the most diverse administration ever. He has thus far nominated at least seven

women and nine people of color for Cabinet-level positions, including Lloyd Austin, the first African American to be Secretary of Defense, Janet Yellen, the first female Secretary of the Treasury, Alejandro Mayorkas, the first immigrant to lead the Department of Homeland Security. "I don't see this election as being about choosing a candidate who will be able to lead us in the right direction. That will be about choosing a candidate who can be most effectively pressured into allowing more space for the evolving antiracism movement," Angela Davis, a veteran and an icon of America's antiracism campaign, said in an interview to RT. "Biden is very problematic in many ways. But - I say 'but' - Biden is far more likely to take mass demands seriously, far more likely than the current occupant of the White House."

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RPT - Roscosmos Hopes Virtual Reality Documentary About ISS Will Attract Youth to Space Science

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - Russia's Space Agency Roscosmos hopes the documentary film "Space Explorers: The ISS Experience" will fascinate and draw more young people to space science, Roscosmos Advanced Programs and Science Director Alexander Bloshenko told Sputnik.

"We hope the version of the film in Russian, produced by using Roscosmos' new virtual reality technology for educational programs will help attract young people to space science," Bloshenko said.

Bloshenko explained that the biggest scientific projects in space exploration, such as the International Space Station (ISS), are implemented through international cooperation and that is why it was important for Roscosmos to take part in the documentary about the ISS.

"The peculiarity of the film is that its main characters and operators are cosmonauts and astronauts from different countries, who show how they live, train and do scientific research on the ISS," he said.

Earlier on Monday, Roscosmos announced that it has begun producing - together with the Canadian Felix & Paul Studios - the documentary series "Space Explorers: The ISS Experience" in a virtual reality format.

Felix Lajeunesse, Felix & Paul Studios creative director, told Sputnik that the documentary is the biggest media project ever filmed in space and emphasized that Russia plays a vital role in it.

"The ISS experience is the result of a great collaboration between international space agencies - Roscosmos, NASA, JAXA, ESA and the Canadian Space Agency, and a sparkling demonstration of what people can accomplish when they work together," Lajeunesse said. "This series aims to immerse worldwide audiences into the reality of life aboard the ISS and that story wouldn't be complete without a special look at the presence of Russia in space - a country that sent the first human to space and immensely contributed to space exploration."

Alena Kuzmenko, representative of Felix & Paul Studios, told Sputnik that virtual reality films are becoming increasingly popular amid the novel coronavirus pandemic.

"The virtual reality market got a boost during the pandemic as such technology allows you to be anywhere, regardless of the closure of physical borders between countries," Kuzmenko said. "In the case of the film Space Explorers: The ISS experience, everyone can feel themselves in space, sitting at home in isolation. There are no boundaries for new technologies in media."

The ISS long-term expedition commander Sergey Ryzhikov and engineer Sergey Kud-Sverchkov will take part in the production of the documentary.

During the shooting of the Russian segment on the ISS, the cosmonauts will talk about life on there, conduct scientific space experiments and share their thoughts about the future of orbital flights, according to Roscosmos.

A unique, specially produced camera is used that has the capability to film in space in a 360-degree format.

Roscosmos said during the filming the cosmonauts discussed the importance of physical training in zero gravity and conducted the so-called Prevention experiment on a treadmill, the Pilot-T experiment and exercised on a stationary bike in the Russian Zvezda module.

Roscosmos also said it will prepare a version of the documentary in Russian for the Russian-speaking audience that it will use for its educational programs.

Russia's broadcaster RT and the tech giant Google also filmed virtual excursions to the ISS by using 360-degree panoramas. In 2016, RT launched the Space 360 project, while Google developed the Street View technology back in 2007.